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Designed for Flourishing

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I. Introduction

Where do we root a Christian understanding of human sexuality, and what shape does it take? Many have the impression that Christian sexual ethics are a litany of inexplicable prohibitions, justified only by tradition or divine fiat. In a world of increasing sexual permissiveness, the number of sexual relationships, practices, and identities that evangelical Christianity does not condone stands in ever sharper relief. Can we still say that the Christian sexual ethic, with all its restrictions, remains not only true but good for humans?

Theological anthropology, especially as communicated by the doctrine of creation, provides a clear affirmative answer.[1] Creation offers great insight for our understanding of human sexuality, as highlighted by the fact that Jesus identified the creation narrative as the locus for a proper understanding of marriage (Mk 10:2–12).[2] The Christian sexual ethic is grounded not only in God's authority as creator, but in God's design for His human creatures. A positive Christian understanding of sexuality undergirds the negative prohibitions of sexual immorality. God's design is good and for our good. The church must seek to express this truth clearly and consistently.

Of course, nothing more is required to justify Christian obedience to the biblical prohibitions against promiscuity, adultery, lust, homosexuality, and other sexual practices than the conviction that God has spoken on the matter. But if we do not understand *why* the prohibitions have been given—if our sexual ethics are Christian but our understanding of sexuality is formed by secular and pagan culture—we will have an unresolved tension in our hearts and minds. That unresolved tension is readily exploited by the change agents of Western culture, resulting in compromised moral reasoning.

It is imperative, therefore, that our sexual ethics not be a free-floating series of prohibitions detached from a Christian understanding of sexuality—which is a facet of Christian theological anthropology. Human sexuality is grounded in creation and intended to serve God's purpose for

1 David H. Kelsey notes that 'The traditional doctrinal home of theological anthropology has been a doctrine of *creation*', but he also discusses how other loci have been proposed more recently. Kelsey, 'The Human Creature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122 (italics in original).

2 See Robert A. J. Gagnon, 'Sexuality', in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 449–50.

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human flourishing. Beginning with God the triune creator and His desire for human flourishing, we can see the meaning of sexuality unfold in the creation accounts of Genesis 1–2, and we can set creation anthropology in the context of the further developments in the drama of redemption.

II. Creator, Creation and Creatures

The most basic statement in theological anthropology is that the human being is a creature.[3] We are neither gods nor accidents. We were made and did not make ourselves. As creatures, we cannot understand ourselves apart from understanding our creator. A key to our self-understanding lies in the doctrine of creation, and creatureliness must shape our self-understanding at every point.

The first and fundamental point of reference for any creature is its creator. From the creator come design and purpose—cosmology and teleology alike. This observation justifies placing the initial accent in theological anthropology on the *theological* rather than on the anthropology. 'Christian anthropology … does not start with "the phenomenon of human being" as a societal, individual, or even a theological construct. It starts with God.'[4] We understand ourselves most clearly by looking first without, not within. Who made us? What is our creator like?

If these are impossible questions to answer, then we can know ourselves only provisionally; anthropology then becomes a science, subject to the same methods and limitations as chemistry or physics. In fact, if we cannot answer the questions about our creator, then we may not be sure that we are creatures at all. We may be accidents, in which case anthropology may actually be merely an extension of chemistry and physics, a description of how chemical processes lead to the bizarre spectacle of (apparently) self-aware organisms moving about and interacting. We may, as far as we know, be a rather unconscious joke produced accidentally by an unthinking and unfeeling universe. If that were the case, I think that most of us would find the joke in pretty poor taste.

But God *has* spoken; therefore, it is possible for us to know about him with certainty. We can know that we are creatures. We can know about him and about ourselves. Francis Schaeffer described this fact well after reflecting on a couple passages from the Lamentations of Jeremiah: 'For man is not just a chance configuration of atoms in the slipstream of meaningless chance history. No. Man, made in the image of God, has a purpose—to be in relationship to the God who is there. And whether it is in Jeremiah's day, or in our own recent generations, the effect is the same. Man forgets his purpose, and thus he forgets who he is and what life means.'[5]

Anthropology is then a patient and

3 As Richard Lints points out in *Identity and Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 24, this is also basic to understanding our relationship with God, our Creator.

4 Cherith Fee Nordling, "The Human Person in the Christian Story," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65.

5 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 35.

careful listening to what God has said about us, in the same way as (and related to) theology proper's attentive listening to what God has said about himself. As Richard Lints pithily puts it, 'We are the way we are because God is the way he is, and we are the way we are because we are not God.'[6] Divine revelation tells us that God is infinitely wise, powerful and good. Correspondingly, what God has created is well-designed, purposeful and intended for flourishing. Our existence is meaningful and we may speak meaningfully of human destiny.

Yet, importantly, God's revelation is more than just verbal and propositional. The climax of divine revelation is missional—the sending of God the Son through God the Spirit by God the Father, and of God the Spirit by God the Son from God the Father. The tri-personal coming of God to us is the most profound element in divine revelation. Even when we consider revelation that was given long before the triune missions, we do not consider it apart from those missions. So Christian exegesis of Genesis 1, for instance, recognizes the account of God (v. 1), present in the Spirit (v. 2), creating all things by the Word (v. 3).

God the Holy Trinity is our maker. Creation comes not as the desperate act of a needy god, but as the work of an infinitely loving God who already enjoys perfect communion in the fullness of divine life. 'It is important to emphasize that God's triune life of perfect communication and communion exists before us, apart from us, and without any need of us.'[7] Only the Christian conception of God, decisively revealed in the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit, puts creation in the proper perspective of divine superabundance. God, who knows what perfect flourishing is, creates in order to bless; God truly desires the flourishing of his creatures.

III. Genesis 1: Days, Dominion and Gender

The creation narrative of Genesis 1 is a complex literary work of tremendous theological richness as it describes the forming and filling of the world. With regard to humanity, the first thing to notice is the place of mankind in the narrative structure. Humanity is the capstone creature—created on the sixth and final day of the creation week, together with the other creatures that move along the ground, but clearly distinguished from them, with a unique place among the beings that fill God's good earth.

Mankind's distinction is marked by a radical break in the pattern of divine creative activity. The process until this point has been marked by efficacious divine speech; with an authoritative command God has summoned being from nothingness, order from chaos, and life from inertia. But now the narrative shifts. Divine speech still leads the way, but it is the speech of deliberation: 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" ' (v. 26). It is possible that the plural of this discourse is another indicator of God's tri-unity.[8]

6 Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 21.

7 Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 5.

8 See Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 12;

In a majestic pause, the triune Creator declares His intention to crown creation with a creature made in the Creator's image. This is the last act of creation, the completing stroke after which God rests in sovereign enjoyment of His handiwork (1:31–2:3).

Even more than our distinctive place in the creation narrative, the *imago Dei* has captured the theological imagination throughout history and has held a definitive place in Christian understanding of human identity. It is often treated as the keystone in theological anthropology, though some recent theologians have regarded it as over-emphasized because it receives little attention in the canon. But while acknowledging the scarcity of direct references to the image of God in the Scriptures, Marc Cortez avers that 'even when the *imago Dei* is not explicitly stated, it is frequently assumed.'[9] We should at least recognize that, if the image of God is not frequently mentioned, its mentions are momentously positioned.

Other creatures are made after their 'kind', but humans are made in God's image and likeness.[10] This does not nullify our creaturehood; we stand, together with the rest of the works of creation, on the same side of that infinite qualitative gap that separates creator from creatures, God from all that is not God.[11] But there is also an essential gap separating us from the rest of creation, the utter uniqueness of the *imago Dei*.

Humans are like God, with the likeness of an image, made to resemble Him. Theological anthropology has wrestled extensively to understand what this means, proposing understandings of the *imago Dei* that may be labelled ontological, functional and relational—that is, that the image of God is what we are, what we do or how we relate, respectively. As we follow the text, we will see all three of these elements appear, in intertwined fashion. Being precedes doing; doing flows from being; but (mis)doing can also disorder being.

This interplay of aspects is important to note. It reminds us that, on one hand, humans are *made* in the image of God and therefore never cease to be in God's image no matter what action they take (or fail to take). Regardless of how corrupt or comatose they may be, every human bears the image of God and retains the dignity and distinction implied thereby (cf. Gen 9:6). On the other hand, imaging God is not only a matter of being but also of behaviour, and we can reflect God's likeness to a greater or lesser extent by our actions and relations. Sin, which is opposed to God's character and will, distorts our imaging of God and thus impairs our ability to realize our true identity.

The image that connects humans

Nonna Verna Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 170, attests to patristic interpretation on these lines.

9 Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 15.

10 See Catherine McDowell, 'In the Image of God He Created Them', in *The Image of God in an Image-Driven Age*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 38.

11 On the radical distinction between God and even human creatures, see Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 77.

with God comes together with a sacred vocation and the connection between humanity and the rest of the living creatures.[12] Sandwiched between the divine discourse describing the intent to create mankind in the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26a) and the statement of this creative accomplishment (v. 27) is another statement of divine intention: 'and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth' (v. 26b). Then, after the creation of humanity in God's image, this statement of intent is expressed as a vocation: 'God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" ' (v. 28). We are unique among the creatures, but from our very creation our lives are entwined with theirs.

We act out God's image in our role and function as rulers over creation. God is Lord over all, and so to be in His image means to exercise loving lordship over His works, as subrulers entrusted with dominion by the cosmic King.[13] '"Dominion" constitutes one aspect of the image of God in humankind, because if humans are to represent God, they must somehow participate in his kingly qualities. But the kingdom or the reign of God is not one of brute force, but of loving fatherhood.'[14] As God creates out of His own superabundance of life and bliss, so He charges the creatures made in His image with the task of nurturing His works. Environmental concern is basic to human nature. We are instruments in the divine agenda for creation's flourishing.[15]

And just as the *imago Dei* is connected with human vocation, it is likewise connected with human relations. 'God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' (v. 27). Sexual differentiation is a key aspect of human identity in the divine image.[16] Of course, sexual differentiation is not unique to humanity, but it is not mentioned in the creation of any other creatures that possess it. For the animals, male and female is simply biology; for humans, it is something deeper, a profound factor in identity.

Gender is the basic binary distinction of humanity. It shows us to be, like our Creator, profoundly relational. 'Being human in God's image is fundamentally about communion, loving God and neighbor. That is always an embodied love, a love that fully engages the whole human

12 Hans Schwarz expresses a strongly functional understanding of the *imago Dei* in *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 23. However, it is questionable whether his denial of the ontological aspect can stand in light of Gen. 9:6.

13 See John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 785–86.

14 Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 139-40.

15 Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image*, 124.

16 Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 14; cf. Kelly M. Kapic, 'Anthropology' in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 175–76. Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 792, sees a connection but does not regard the sexual binary as the *imago*'s meaning.

being.'[17] None of us lives as a generic human; rather, as gendered humans, man and woman, we live and relate.[18]

Some theologians have seen in this nature a hint of the Trinity, God's mysterious unity and multiplicity, His essential relationality. So Cherith Fee Nordling: 'Human "being" and identity are grounded in the reality of the triune communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Bearing the image of God who *is* "being-in-relation," we too are constituted as distinct beings in essential relationality with God and others.'[19] God made creatures in His likeness who would have the capacity for deep relationships and derive joy from them. Our need for human relationships points ultimately to our need for a relationship with our Creator.

Further, the integration of our relational and functional aspects should not be missed.[20] Humans are created in God's image as male and female. They are then commanded to embrace the divine vocation, to which their binary distinction and relationality will be essential: 'and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it" ' (v. 28). As Kelly Kapic explains, 'Humans were created to live not as isolated, autonomous individuals but in community with one another and in life-giving connection with the material world as the environment for communion with God.'[21] Ecology and sexuality go together, both are rooted in identity, and all is to be seen in the light of God's plan for the flourishing of His creation.

Flourishing in God's design is not merely a human-centred or even a creation-centred agenda; our flourishing is meant to involve and occasion praise of our Creator. That is, the creation account remains a religious text. The human vocation may be described as an ecological priesthood.[22] Richard Lints explains:

> The liturgical shape of the first table [Gen 1:1–2:3] points to the conclusion that the created order as portrayed in Genesis 1 is a kind of temple in which the glory of God is reflected and the divine presence rests. In this respect creation is a theatre for the worship of God, though he is not merely a stage presence, but intends to be present throughout the created order. The created order is temple-like because it is filled with the presence of the divine King, the purpose for which God built this temple in the first instance.[23]

In the grand design, the human purpose is worship, and to this purpose our priestly identity in the *imago Dei* is tied. We are to worship the divine Creator and display the divine image by our likeness to Him.[24] Hu-

17 Kapic, 'Anthropology', 178.

18 See Molly T. Marshall, *What It Means To Be Human* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1995), 75.

19 Nordling, 'The Human Person', 70 (emphasis in original). See also Anderson, *On Being Human*, 105: 'The content of the *imago* is experienced as differentiation within unity'.

20 See the connection drawn by Edwin C. Hui (Xu Zhi-Wei), *At the Beginning of Life: Dilemmas in Theological Bioethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 145.

21 Kapic, 'Anthropology', 188.

22 See Frame's description of the priestly office of human dominion in *Systematic Theology*, 790–91.

23 Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 53.

24 On the representational dimension of the image, see Thiselton, *Systematic Theol-*

man gender and sexuality are thus part of a great confluence of realities governing human identity and purpose.[25]

IV. Genesis 2: Dust, Breath and a Rib

Turning to Genesis 2, we see some of the same themes expressed in different ways and with different emphases. Because there are two successive creation accounts, the repetition of themes and variety of details together provide richer theological insight into an event of such foundational significance. Perhaps there is an analogy here to the canonical presence of four gospels, whose cumulative testimony unpacks the greater event of the work of Christ. In any case, the two creation accounts are constructive in their differences—complementary, not contradictory.

Whereas the first creation account supplied the pivotal knowledge that mankind is made in the image of God, the second account elaborates on the functional and relational aspects of human identity in the image. This is especially helpful for developing an understanding of human sexuality rooted in creation. But the setting of the man-woman relationship keeps readers conscious of the human-nature relationship, as well as of the human-divine relationship that undergirds both.

Mankind's stewardship is front-loaded in the account with the observation that the ground is unproductive without people to work it (2:5). In the creation of man, the human connection with the earth is stressed, for 'the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground' (v. 7a). We are of the earth. This fact points once again to the fundamental environmental concern of humanity, but also to our creatureliness and inherent frailty. Having been elevated with the knowledge that we are made in God's image, we are brought back 'down to earth' with the knowledge that we are dust.

Yet we are *God's* dust, his workmanship, formed by his hand; and God, having fashioned the man, 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being' (v. 7b). 'The beautiful picture of God stooping in the mud to form the human persons, sharing with these special beings the very breath of life, God's own spirit, suggests the intimacy of God's relationship to these unique creatures.'[26] We are creatures, but clearly we are beloved creatures, specially blessed in God's creative work.

The man formed of earth is given charge over earth. God made a marvellous home for his favoured creature, a paradisiacal garden: 'Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it' (v. 15). Humans' flourishing will be connected with their vocation in bringing about the flourishing of creation under their charge. The earth for which mankind cares will be their own sustenance and delight (v. 9), and the animal world is also under human authority (vv. 19–20).

This is the point where the binary

ogy, 140; Schwarz, *The Human Being*, 24.

25 This observation helps to justify the strong attention to matters of sexuality characteristic of evangelicals; see Gagnon, 'Sexuality', 449.

26 Marshall, *What It Means*, 28.

of human relationality re-enters the picture. Lions and oxen are good, but not good enough for what God has in mind (v. 20). 'Man's best friend' will prove insufficient as man's divinely appointed helper. The solitude of the first man, the lack of a complementary partner for him, is the first thing in a thoroughly good creation that God calls not good (v. 18).[27]

The divine solution to this solitude is of essential significance. In the words of Molly Marshall, 'The creation of humanity is not complete until there is male and female. The biblical writer's point is that women and men form the basic unit of the human family and, as male and female human beings, express the wholeness of humanity.'[28]

God created a complementary partner for man: woman. He created her out of the rib of the man, which expresses indirectly her sharing in the fellowship with the earth, and directly her sharing in the man's total humanity (vv. 21–22). Man and woman are equally human, possessed of a basic unity. But man and woman are also definitely distinct, characterized by an essential binary difference. This is captured in the man's statement upon receiving his partner (v. 23): 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'

The relational distinction of humanity from the first creation account is reinforced in the second. Man and woman are equally human, but they are not the same. They are neither changeable nor interchangeable. Every human is either male or female and, correspondingly, man or woman. Scientifically, we have come to understand that this is true at the genetic level. But theologically, the created binary of humanity was made known to us long before we had knowledge of XX and XY chromosomal pairs.

Such a complementary distinction is of utmost relevance to human sexuality. When the first man needed a fit partner for the task of stewardship over creation, God did not create another man; he created woman. The man received her and noted their unity and distinction. Then the Scripture says, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh' (v. 24). The complementary distinction of man and woman, the relational binary, is the grounds for their unitive married sexuality.

In this way, the biological complementarity of human sexuality attains a spiritual significance, as it expresses a return to unity in difference. As Robert Gagnon explains, 'Marriage is God's instrument for *re*uniting the male and female into an integrated sexual whole. This purpose is symbolized by the copulative act (and partly effected by it) and illustrated by the story of woman's creation from Adam's "side" (a better translation than "rib").'[29]

V. Summation: Binary Distinction and Sexual Union

What does the theological anthropology of Genesis 1–2 tell us about

27 See Anderson, *On Being Human*, 113.

28 Marshall, *What It Means*, 77; see Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 35.

29 Gagnon, 'Sexuality', 453 (emphasis in original).

human sexuality? It provides the foundation for the Christian understanding of gender as binary and sexual intimacy as proper to marriage (in the traditional Christian sense). Both concepts can be described positively and clarified negatively.

First, gender is the good gift of God. He did not create generic humans but male and female, man and woman. Both are created in the image of God, and they image God together. Human identity as the divine image-bearer is partially realized in our binary gender distinction and connected with our vocation of stewardship. Manhood is glorious and womanhood is glorious too. It is a privilege and delight to bear the image of God in our gendered specificity, and to flourish as man and woman in God's world.

Against transgenderism and related ideologies, the creation account teaches that there are two and only two genders. We may distinguish gender from biological sex, but we cannot detach it. God created humanity as male and female—man and woman respectively. Our biology is not incidental to our gender identity but determinative of it.

Second, sexual intimacy is the good gift of God. When a man and a woman are united in the covenant of marriage, they proceed to enjoy sexual intimacy, with its manifold aspects of pleasure, procreation, affection and union. The last of these is the most central and theologically significant aspect of the sexual act. Robert Gagnon is worth quoting at length here:

> Marriage serves a vital purpose, not merely for procreation and childrearing, sexual gratification and intimate companionship, but also for being reshaped, through reintegration with one's sexual complement, into the human being that God intends. However, this does not mean that one *must* be in a sexual relationship in order to be formed into God's image, for God has other means at his disposal to shape his human creation, including the difficulties of sexual abstinence (note Jesus' and Paul's own celibacy). Nevertheless, if a sexual relationship is to be had, it must be had in such a way that the image of God is enhanced, not effaced. The requirements for sexual purity always take precedence over longings for a sexual relationship, where the two are in conflict.[30]

Against adultery, promiscuity, polyamory, homosexuality, pornography, bestiality and rape, the creation account teaches that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively in a loving, monogamous heterosexual relationship. Sex is not merely about procreation but it is also not merely about pleasure or even love. It is a profoundly unitive act in which the human binary of man and woman is reunited. Sexual acts apart from this union are a distortion of God's design for sexual intimacy.

VI. Clarification: Deviations from the Normative

Before proceeding to connect this creational paradigm to the realities of fall and redemption, we should clarify it in two ways: regarding sexual expression outside this paradigm and

30 Gagnon, 'Sexuality', 454–55 (emphasis in original). See also John Behr, *Becoming Human: Meditations on Christian Anthropology in Word and Image* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 72–83.

regarding abstention from sexual acts (celibacy). These are both exceptions to the norm established in creation, but the former is prohibited by Scripture whereas the latter is permitted and even encouraged. How does the logic of God's design in creation connect with the more explicit teachings of Scripture about human sexuality?

Regarding other sexual activity, one might object that the creation account does not decisively limit sexual expression. Even if we grant that sex is designed to be unitive between man and woman, does that really necessitate a monogamous or a loving union? And does that purpose really delegitimate all other sexual unions, particularly homosexual relationships?

I maintain that these implications are legitimately derived from the creation narrative. The fact that sex is a profoundly unitive act does indeed imply that the sexual act should be monogamous, covenantal, loving and complementary (i.e. heterosexual). However, the argument of this article is not so much that Christian sexual ethics can be wholly and explicitly derived from Genesis 1–2, but that the creation account is foundational and provides the underlying logic for the sexual ethics presented elsewhere in Scripture.

In other words, there is no need to prove the whole Christian sexual ethic from the creation paradigm. Rather, the creation paradigm is the point of departure for Christian sexual ethics, and it shows the significance of the explicit prohibitions of various sexual acts found in the Bible. God cares enough about our flourishing to have addressed this area with abundant clarity.

So if one asks, 'How do we know that the divine design for human sexuality revealed in creation does not allow for adultery?' we may turn to the clear proscriptions of adultery in such passages as Exodus 20:14 and Matthew 15:19. If the question is 'Why is adultery forbidden?' the first place to turn for an answer is the creation account and the unitive meaning of sexuality: adultery violates the marriage union.

Of course, few people need an explanation of why adultery is forbidden in Christian sexual ethics. But this practice of understanding sexual ethics creationally and canonically applies to the issues more widely disputed in contemporary society as well. Perhaps most important, it shows the coherence of Christian opposition to homosexual practice. The biblical prohibitions against homosexual activity are clear and quite pronounced (Lev 18:22; Rom 1:24–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). But someone influenced by the cultural forces that have been so powerfully at work in Western society over the last decade could easily be puzzled by the biblical condemnation of a behaviour that so many people have come to accept as natural and good. The creation narrative, with its emphasis on sexual complementarity and unity, explains why homosexuality is contrary to God's design for human flourishing.

The same applies to polyamory, a rising candidate for normalization in Western society—though the situation here is more complicated, because it requires tracing the canonical development of the Bible's teaching on this issue. Polygamy abounds in the Old Testament and was practised by many of the Old Testament saints. But when we come to the New Testament, the ethical standard is unequivocally monogamous. This is best explained

by turning to the creation account and understanding that polygamy was not part of God's design for human sexuality, but that for whatever reason He permitted it for a time. This does not mean that it was good even in the case of Old Testament heroes who engaged in the practice, and in the clarity of the new covenant we are called to embrace God's good design. A parallel may be found in the case of divorce, where Jesus dismissed the permissive Mosaic legislation and called disciples instead to attend to God's creational intent (Mk 10:2–12).

But if these deviations from the creation paradigm are, indeed, illegitimate, what about celibacy? Abstinence, too, is a divergence from marital sexuality. A divergence in the form of non-participation is categorically different from engaging in immoral sexual activity; nonetheless, if Genesis 1–2 were the whole of revelation, we might conclude that celibacy too falls short of God's perfect plan.

The broader witness of Scripture shows that this is not the case. Even if the Old Testament tends to correlate a fertile marriage with the blessing of God, things are radically different in the New Testament. Surely there can be no more convincing argument for the virtue of celibacy than the example of Jesus, who is true man, fully human and without any blemish of sin.

What has changed? Christ has ushered in the Kingdom of God, which is partially realized even now. Under this new covenant, the creation paradigm of married sexuality persists side by side with a paradigm of singleness for the sake of the Kingdom. 'Marriage was no longer to be regarded as a duty of Torah or as a necessary condition for human fulfillment and divine approval. Of course, until the Kingdom comes celibacy is not a duty either (Mt 19:12), and marriage remains an option.'[31] Both are permissible and blessed alternatives for God's people in the present time (1 Cor 7), whereas sexual activity apart from the creational design is not.[32]

Interestingly enough, if the New Testament shows a preference, it is for celibacy in service to God (1 Cor 7:32, 38). As Barry Danylak says, 'Looked at positively as a celebration of the complete sufficiency of Christ, singleness can be a powerful witness for the gospel.'[33] The advancement of the Kingdom takes precedence over all other concerns, and human identity is ultimately found in Christ, in God the Son who became man for us. Gender identity and sexual expression have not disappeared, but they are superseded by fellowship with Christ and with one another in him. So the Christian who does not desire to marry, or who is otherwise unable to have a healthy sexual relationship after the pattern of creation, is not doomed to an unfulfilled life or a less actualized human identity.

VII. Conclusion: Design, Disruption and Destiny

Creation is the beginning place for a Christian response to the sexual chaos of contemporary Western (and, to

31 Barry L. Bandstra and Allen D. Verhey, 'Sex', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., vol. 4, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 435.

32 See Bandstra and Verhey, 'Sex', 436; Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 196.

33 Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 140.

some extent, global) society, but it is not the whole story. Creation shows the design for human sexuality, but that design must be brought into the world we presently inhabit and understood in light of its disruption and destiny.

Christian ethics will be horribly skewed if we fail to recognize that Genesis 1 and 2 were followed by Genesis 3. That sounds silly, but in practice this error is all too common. Even in secular contexts, a theology of creation is frequently brought into discourse on sexuality while overlooking any notion of the fall. Two standard expressions of this theology that are applied to people who embrace some sexual aberration—each one a premise in the total argument, though often only one or the other is stated—are 'God made you this way', and 'God doesn't make mistakes'. The former statement is false, though it implies the latter (true) premise; the latter is true, but it implies the former (false) premise.

Since these theologies do not take the fall into account and therefore hold that human sexuality as experienced now is fully in accord with God's design, they may be classified as alternative doctrines of humanity. The appropriate setting for such a doctrine of humanity is not Christianity—for which Genesis 3 is acutely significant—but the vaguely theistic and implicitly deistic worldview of popular Western spirituality.

Christian theological anthropology, however, is aware not only of our created design but also of the disruption caused by the fall into sin (Gen 3). G. K. Chesterton said, 'The primary paradox of Christianity is that the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the normal itself is an abnormality. That is the inmost philosophy of the Fall.'[34]

Theologians debate whether the *imago Dei* was untouched, defaced or demolished by the fall,[35] but the immediate recorded consequences of sin include disruption of mankind's being (death, Gen 3:19), vocation (the resistance of the land to human dominion, vv. 17–19), and relations (the striving between man and woman, v. 16). Even more significantly and more tragically, the consummate consequence of sin was separation from God. Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden (vv. 22–24). The creatures made in the image of God are now estranged from God, and only God can bring them back to himself.

Sexual immorality, in all its variety, is sin. But sexual sin receives particular attention in Scripture, perhaps because of the intimate connections between sexuality and human identity, vocation and relations. Having rooted sexual ethics in creation, we must not make the mistake of regarding sexual sin as merely a rather benign failure to receive God's best intentions for our lives. Scripture does not treat it so lightly.

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34 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (New York: Image Books, 1990), 158.

35 Usually one of the latter two options is advocated. Cortez (*Theological Anthropology*, 16–17) cites a general agreement that the image has been affected by sin. But see John F. Kilner, 'Humanity in God's Image: Is the Image Really Damaged?' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 3 (September 2010): 601–17. Kilner argues that the Bible does not provide grounds for the commonplace theological belief that the image of God was damaged, distorted or destroyed by the fall.

God created this world for flourishing, and flourishing in accordance with God's plan is to live properly as humans; in contrast, twisting God's good design defaces our human identity and dishonours the God whose image we bear. 'The [biblical] story considered as a whole suggests that the overriding dimension of the creatures' relationship to their Creator is that of worship and honour. Conversely, the subverting of that relationship carries the connotation of perversion, corruption, consumption and self-worship.'[36]

If our maleness and femaleness, and the possibility of uniting male and female in the bond of marital sexual intimacy, are connected with God's design for humanity—as the creation account demonstrates—then the wrongness of sexual immorality emerges in stark relief. Sexual sin, the apostle Paul says, is to sin against one's own body (1 Cor 6:18). It is a direct negation of the image of God in the human person, a denial of God's design and even of God himself. No appeal to the goodness of pleasure or human love can justify this defiance of God and defacement of His image in mankind. In pursuing human flourishing on our own terms, we invariably become further mired in our alienation from God.

But the Christian message does not end there; alienation is only the state of the problem, not the final word. Defying creation or denying the fall in pursuit of autonomy leads only to further brokenness; the ultimate tragedy of denying the fall is that you also lose the gospel. Without a doctrine of the fall, there is no place for a doctrine of redemption. But there was a fall, and God has acted, in mercy and majesty and might, for our redemption. Flourishing remains a possibility because of the restorative work of God. When our first parents lost their innocence, God provided clothing for them, 'garments of skin' (Gen 3:21). Something died to cover them. In this gesture of grace, God foreshadowed the death that would cover the sins of all those who receive the gift of life and would restore in them the tarnished *imago Dei*.

For Jesus Christ, God the Son, 'is the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15); yet, for our redemption, he became incarnate, 'being made in the likeness of men' (Phil 2:7). He covered our sins with his blood shed on the cross (Heb 9:14). Those who receive the salvation God graciously gives have a glorious destiny, which includes being 'conformed to the image of his Son' (Rom 8:29).

The *telos* of human sexuality is its eclipse by the reality it was given to symbolize. Presumably, the resurrection body includes gender, but resurrection life does not include marriage (Mt 22:30). Instead, our longed-for union with God will be fully realized. The church will be united with Christ, her groom (Rev 19:7–9). God's people will dwell with him and the Scripture will be fulfilled: 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and he will dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be among them' (Rev 21:3). The union of man and woman will give way to union with God. In those simple words that speak of an indescribable wonder, 'they will see his face' (Rev 22:4).

36 Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 61–62.